



**Western Sydney University, School of Education
Annual Fair Go Lecture 2022
Dorothy Hoddinott AO**

Dorothy Hoddinott is an Officer of the Order of Australia. She is Presiding Pro-Chancellor at Sydney University, where she is also an Honorary Fellow. She holds Honorary Doctorates from both Sydney University and Western Sydney University. She holds the Australian Human Rights Commission's Human Rights Medal.

In terms of educational service specifically, she has been awarded the Western Sydney Leadership Award for services to education and refugees. She holds the Australian College of Educators Medal for service to school education, particularly to disadvantaged students. She is an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Council for Educational leadership. She has been President of the Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language and served on its Board for over 20 years. She was also President of the NSW Joint Council of Professional Teachers Associations, now the NSW Professional Teachers' Council, and served on its Board for as many years. She was the author of the Professional Teachers' Council Human Rights Policy (2002). The establishment of the national Association of Professional Teachers' Councils, now APTA, was her initiative, and she was its inaugural President. Through her leadership and advocacy, teacher professional associations as a collective have a national voice in educational policy development. APTA as an association awards the Dorothy Hoddinott Medal to members who are deemed to have shown outstanding lifetime leadership.

From the mid-1970s, she taught at schools in South-Western Sydney and the inner west, eventually becoming Principal at Holroyd. For the whole of her teaching career she worked tirelessly both within and outside schools to support newly arrived immigrant students. As Principal of Holroyd, she led her school in addressing the needs of an expanding enrolment of refugee students who had experienced trauma, terror, displacement and detention. Her conspicuous and continued involvement in the education of immigrant and refugee students has significantly enlarged school and post-school educational opportunities for those students.

Equity

I would like to thank Western Sydney University for the invitation to deliver the inaugural *Fair Go* lecture. I will start by acknowledging the original owners of this land and paying my respects to Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal people present today.

Education is a fundamental human right. Article 26 (1) of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN 1948) states:

Everyone has the right to an education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on a basis of merit.

Australia is a signatory to the *Declaration*, as it is to the *UN Charter* (1945) and the other eight UN human rights treaties, and had, of course, already met the basic benchmarks of free, compulsory, secular, elementary education in all jurisdictions well before it became a signatory to the Declaration and well before human rights were enshrined in international agreements. In addition to free, compulsory, secular primary schooling, most Australian children in 1948 also attended the first few years of secondary school but relatively few proceeded to higher education.

I started school in 1948 and was one of the fortunate few to complete high school and go to university. Like most Australian children of the time, my education was in public schools.

The world has changed a great deal since 1948, as has education, so what does being a signatory to UN treaties mean in practice for contemporary Australia?

Important to understanding Australia's international treaty obligations is that while they may be morally binding, until the provisions of these treaties are enacted in domestic law, they are not legally binding in Australian law. This may help you understand the Government's rationale for the harsh treatment of asylum seekers in recent times, for instance, or the difficulties raised by the proposed Religious Freedom Bill, which conflict with international human rights principles and obligations.

International human rights law does not automatically enter domestic law when agreements are signed. The purpose of the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948 was to make the *UN Charter* (1945), which is essentially a procedural document, more explicit in customary international law, but States Parties still needed to enact the human rights provisions of the *Charter* into domestic law.

The *Charter* is, of course, a document of its time, written in the immediate aftermath of World War II, with millions of people displaced and millions of children deprived of an education, sadly not unlike the situation today internationally.

Post-World War II, during the period of reconstruction and decolonisation and the beginnings of the Cold War, many nations were unable to provide even a basic education for all their children, let alone secondary and technical education, or higher education for more than a privileged few. Australia only seriously embarked upon secondary education for all its children after the Second World War.

Ensuring that all children had access at least to free elementary education was the most urgent priority after the war, as states sought to rebuild civil society and establish their own independent identities, in the case of new nations.

The 1966 *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, which Australia signed in 1975, and the 1989 *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, extended the right to an education to include free

secondary and vocational education, and to progressively making higher education accessible and available, based on capacity, and free.

Between 1948 and 1975, when Australia signed the *Covenant*, Australian education and Australian society had changed considerably. Some of this change was a consequence of social changes generally; a great deal was due to post-war immigration.

By 1975, Australia was a multicultural nation, whose schools reflected the new reality. Secondary schooling had been extended to six years and the school leaving age increased to fifteen in most jurisdictions. Students were encouraged to complete high school and gain further qualifications, either in technical education or at a tertiary level, both of which were free.

There was also recognition for the first time by Government of the need to allocate additional resources to the education of disadvantaged students to bring them to parity, with additional funding provided by the Commonwealth through the Disadvantaged Schools' Program. Of course, since 1975, there have been even greater changes again.

Education is both an individual and a social good; however, positive outcomes do not necessarily flow automatically from the provision of education services alone. This is where equity comes in. I would argue that the most important issue for Australian education in 2022 is equity.

What do we mean by equity? Terms such as *human rights*, *social justice*, *equity*, and *equality* are often used interchangeably, and consequently the distinctions between them can get blurred.

Human rights are the overarching principles that inform a just society, and as overarching principles, human rights are often aspirational, but they can be enacted in law, as in anti-discrimination legislation or compulsory schooling.

Equity is the enabling principle, those actions or processes which remove the barriers to equality of access to rights such as education or health care or voting. Equity is the *fairness quotient*.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines **equity in education** as meaning that:

Schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students...equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students' outcomes, such as academic performance, social and emotional well-being, and post-secondary educational attainment, do not depend on their socio-economic background.

David Gonski made a similar observation when he commented that 'demography should not be destiny'.

Equality is not about being the same as everyone else but having the same rights and the same access to those rights, no matter who you are. Equality under the law is a basic democratic principle.

Social justice is an outcome of the application of these principles. The OECD also sees social mobility as an important outcome of an equitable education.

Social mobility is the upward change in the socio-economic status of individuals between their status in childhood and their status in adult life. Let me give you an example. In 2014, I attended the graduation in Nursing at the University of Technology Sydney of a former refugee student of mine. Sokaina is from the persecuted Hazara minority in Afghanistan. She came to Australia with her family as a thirteen-year-old through the humanitarian program. She was completely illiterate when she enrolled in the Holroyd High School Intensive English Centre. Sokaina was the first person in her entire family to go to school and was the first person in her family to graduate from university - but she will not be the last.

When children from very disadvantaged backgrounds undertake an equitable education journey, one that enables them to reach their potential, they take their entire family with them. Everyone in her family is the beneficiary of Sokaina's education. Her two young children will be educated Australians. Sokaina and her husband will ensure that. Sokaina is a full-time nurse at Concord Hospital, specialising in midwifery and is considering studying Medicine. The Sokaina who was completely unschooled at thirteen years of age could never have imagined her life now. Her education was genuinely transformative. It can never be taken from her, and it informs every aspect of her adult life.

Social mobility is a particularly important outcome of an equitable education, but it is not the only outcome we need to consider. Article 26 (2) states that:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

The *Covenant* took this further: *the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity...education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society.*

In other words, education is not only a human right, education is the key to the realisation of self and the recognition of the other through *the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms*. Article 26 (2) takes us well beyond the narrow national focus of the conventional *Civics and Citizenship* curriculum. There can be no freedom without respect for human rights, there can be no freedom without respect for the rights of others, you cannot respect others unless you respect yourself, and respect derives from an education that is fair and inclusive, *the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity*. Education is at the very heart of human rights and a just society, and the realisation of our shared humanity.

How do we ensure that all children have access to an education that is fair and inclusive, that allows them to participate effectively in society and contribute to the common good, and enables them to realise their potential as human beings?

At Holroyd High School, we put into practice Article 26(2) of the *Covenant*, the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This helped our students face the future with hope, particularly the refugee students, who had lost everything except their lives in fleeing persecution - and children from the underclass, for whom hope is always a luxury.

Fundamental to everything we did at the school was respect. Respect and the other side of the coin – responsibility – informed everything that happened every day. They were our enabling principles and through them we built the trust that is essential to a civil society, the hope for the future that is essential for meaningful engagement with education and society, and the capacity that enabled students to reach their educational potential. We did so in the face of what often seemed like intractable government policy.

Schools play a critical role in building a better life for less privileged people in the community and the successful settlement of new communities in Australia. Schools also contribute significantly to social cohesion, the glue that holds society together.

Schools do this both through expanding educational, and therefore life, opportunities for their students and through building the civic values and sense of connection and trust that underpin the social capital essential to a 'civil society' - a term often used loosely in public discourse.

Significant government funding has been allocated to education in Australia over the last half century, some of it with the aim of achieving more equitable outcomes. The hard reality, however, is that despite this expenditure, we do not have an equitable education system.

This is as true within systems as between them: elite and selective schools are at the top of the hierarchy and schools that serve low socio-economic status communities at the bottom. Most low-SES schools are public schools, although there are systemic Catholic schools that serve low-SES communities, particularly in outer metropolitan and regional areas; however, it should be noted that the majority of Catholic students in the bottom quartile of socio-economic status are not enrolled in Catholic schools but in public schools.

The socio-economic profile of Catholic schools has become more middle class over the last twenty years, at the same time as public funding for the Catholic school system has increased.

The relativities in education will not go away of their own accord. Success in schooling is closely aligned to socio-economic status in Australia, as it is in most countries, but the financial privileging of non-government schools, especially over the last two decades, has widened the equity gap between public and private in Australian education – uniquely, among OECD nations.

We tend to think of ourselves as an egalitarian nation, but in fact, the experience and outcomes of education are quite different for young people of different socio-economic status, and the differences between the advantaged and the disadvantaged are at their starkest for Aboriginal students; for disabled students; for refugees and asylum seekers; for LBGQTI students; for the poor; and for students in rural and remote areas. The vast majority of these students are enrolled in public schools.

Where you go to school and who you go to school with are key factors in determining success in schooling. The playing field is increasingly tilted towards the already advantaged, not the disadvantaged. The significant expansion in public funding of non-government schools over the last 20 years is a major contributor to that trend.

Inequity has lifelong consequences for individuals but also has a profound impact on society generally. Australia has become one of the less equitable nations in the OECD. We are a wealthy nation but not a particularly fair one. *Advance Australia Fair* rings a little hollow these days.

Children are, by definition, powerless; however, the education they receive is a major factor in their relative power as adults. That is what the various iterations of disadvantaged school funding have recognised over the past 50 years, and which the Gonski reforms sought to address more recently until undermined by sectoral interests and political expediency.

The report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last Friday of the over-funding of wealthy private schools, in some cases by more than double the SRS (Schooling Resource Standard), should come as no surprise. The SRS is an estimate of the minimum funding level needed to meet students' educational needs. Funding above the base amount takes into account the relative advantage of students and their schools, with additional loadings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments, disabled students, socio-educational disadvantage, English proficiency, school size, and school location.

The Gonski review proposed sector-blind, needs-based government funding for all schools to reduce inequity. Fully implemented, needs-based funding implies a shift in the current funding levels from more advantaged schools, most of which are in the private sector, to less advantaged schools, most of which are in the public sector, according to need.

The Gonski proposals were opposed by the private sector, despite initial in-principle support. The outcome was an agreement between the Government and the private sector to maintain private school funding at previous levels, regardless of whether that funding had been higher than entitlement under earlier agreements. Private schools will all reach 100% of the SRS by 2023. Additionally, funding for private schools has been indexed at 3.5% annually and the indexation legislated to ensure that there is no loss of income in real terms. On the other hand, public schools will *not* be funded to the full 100% of SRS, nor is their funding indexed. The states are expected to pick up the difference but are not obliged to do so. There is no plan for public schools to reach full funding.

Over the past twenty years, the increases in public funding of private schools and the increasing residualisation of many public secondary schools have been paralleled by a marked decline in student performance standards overall in reading, mathematics and science, as measured by international tests, such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) for Year 9 students, and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) for students in Year 5.

The Programme for International Student Assessment tests applied knowledge and critical thinking, not curriculum content, and takes place on a 3-year cycle, using representative samples of schools and fifteen-year-olds. In 2018, the tests involved 740 schools and 14,200 students in Australia. Seventy-nine nations took part.

The decline in performance standards has been considerable: since 2000, when the tests started, Australian students' performance in the PISA tests has dropped from fourth to seventeenth internationally in reading, from eighth to seventeenth in science and from eleventh to thirtieth in mathematics. The average performance in 2018 was about a year behind the 2000 average. While the decline in performance is across the board, most affected are the disadvantaged. The disadvantaged are disproportionately represented in what educators call 'the tail'. PISA has a long tail.

In science, for instance, the measurable gap between the educationally advantaged and the educationally disadvantaged in the PISA tests is equivalent to about three full years of schooling. This gap is likely to have increased during the disruption to schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, explained in part by the greater difficulty of access to adequate resources for online learning by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the greater capacity of more advantaged schools and families to allocate resources swiftly and effectively.

While I am encouraged to read that recent research suggests that online learning seems not to have negatively impacted children's learning, this research has focused on primary students, not students in secondary schools, where the curriculum is subject-specific - rather than integrated - and students are in contact with multiple teachers in any one school day.

The issue is not only the resources available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds but the quality and appropriateness of those resources, and their accessibility. Many disadvantaged students do not have access to up-to-date technology or the Internet at home, and many do not have anywhere to study. Public libraries were closed during the lockdowns.

Human rights

I want to return to human rights and education. Long before anyone started talking about human rights or equity, the founding fathers of Australian Federation introduced legislation to make school education free, secular and compulsory for all children.

If we were to have a nation, they reasoned, then people – both men and women - needed to be literate so they could vote responsibly and take on civic duties and offices; in other words, so they could participate in an informed way in the life of the nation. This was a narrower vision of education, of course, than the vision expressed later in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, but it was ahead of its time, nonetheless.

Aboriginal Australians were not, however, included in this vision, the consequences of which we continue to see today, in low school completion rates (just over 50% in 2018), generally poor academic outcomes and low participation in higher education, although school completion and tertiary enrolments are increasing. At the time, Aboriginal were expected to die out quietly and were protected and segregated to allow that to happen. Their education was irrelevant.

Of course, basic literacy and numeracy alone are no longer sufficient in themselves for informed participation in contemporary society. Article 13(1) of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and*

Cultural Rights (1969) requires States Parties to ensure that 'education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society'.

We should ask ourselves what that means. Australia is culturally very diverse but people from minority cultural groups are under-represented in civic life, as are Aboriginal Australians and women. And there is that widening equity gap, reflected in academic outcomes, school completion rates, post-school destinations, and who gets to be leaders in politics, business, tertiary institutions, and the public service.

The current school completion rate of over 85% sounds impressive when compared to the meagre 15% when I finished school, but completion rates vary considerably from state to state - and within states - and are aligned with factors such as: socio-economic status, where you live, the school you go to, the curriculum on offer at your school, Aboriginality, whether you speak a language other than English at home (and whether that language is a high or low status language), and, if you are an asylum seeker, whether you are turning eighteen.

Students who fail to complete school generally have higher rates of long-term unemployment and are more likely to find themselves in low-paying or casual jobs, and of course, these are the jobs least likely to survive structural change, and have been the jobs to disappear first in the pandemic.

Low educational attainment and low expectations on the part of the students themselves, their parents and their teachers, and on the part of society, play a significant role in students not completing school. There is evidence as well that this has a compounding effect within disadvantaged communities. The extension of the school leaving age to seventeen years has not markedly improved the situation in relation to disadvantaged young people and the increase in school retention rates often masks a lack of opportunity for training and employment for young people at the bottom of the pile.

Inequity is built into our system in so many ways and affects so many young people. Some of that inequity is deliberate government policy. Let me give you an example: I mentioned asylum seeker students turning eighteen: Government policy has been to cease support for young asylum seekers when they turn eighteen, on the grounds that they are now adults and can support themselves. Without additional support, they must leave school to seek work.

It was this policy that led to my establishing the *Friends of Zainab* donor trust in the school accounts in 2002, to enable Zainab, who was on a temporary protection visa, to finish her HSC. With financial support provided by the trust fund, Zainab was able to complete her HSC. She received an offer for Medical Sciences at Macquarie University, but because asylum seeker students are classified as international students, she had to pay full international student fees: students on temporary visas of any kind are ineligible for HECS and HECS-Help.

Students with permanent visas - that is, young people who are permanent residents of Australia but not yet citizens, who are not humanitarian entrants, are eligible for HECS but not HECS-Help, so they have to pay their fees upfront; they cannot defer payment. This policy impacts most heavily on low-SES students, who you might argue, are those most in need of the benefit of higher education.

I negotiated a full scholarship for Zainab with Macquarie University, and the school trust fund provided her with a fortnightly allowance to replace the Special Benefit she had lost at eighteen. She completed her degree with a Distinction average and went on to study Pharmacy at the University of Sydney after finally gaining permanent protection; however, because she had a permanent protection visa granted *in Australia*, she was not considered a humanitarian entrant, so had to pay her HECS upfront. *Friends of Zainab* paid her HECS, enabling her to complete her first degree and undertake the second without incurring a HECS debt. The burden of HECS debt and other costs of a tertiary education are a disincentive to further study for many low-SES students, as are TAFE fees for vocational students.

I was able to raise sufficient funds through donations to the school not only to support Zainab but to help other refugee and asylum seeker students at Holroyd High - essential assistance in a school where approximately 60% of all students were from refugee backgrounds and 65% of all students were in the bottom quartile of socio-educational advantage. Donations to public school scholarship funds are not tax deductible - another discriminatory policy.

Friends of Zainab is now a scholarship fund with the Public Education Foundation, which does have tax deductibility, providing modest scholarships for literally hundreds of refugee students around Australia in their final two years of schooling and the first two years of university. Financial support is essential for refugee students completing their schooling and entering higher education. I do not need to tell you that all refugees are poor, but asylum seekers are even worse off, as they are also subject to restrictive and discriminatory policies designed to prevent their continuing their education and participating equally in Australian life.

While disadvantaged students who gain university entry generally do so against the odds, as their participation rates in tertiary education indicate, refugee students face additional hurdles. All young refugees have suffered trauma and loss, all have had substantial interruption to their education, and some have had no education at all.

Financial support and scholarships – I think of the Harding Miller scholarships, that support disadvantaged girls showing academic promise, for example, or the Smith Family's scholarships – are of critical importance in assisting disadvantaged young people to complete their schooling successfully. However, gaining an HSC should not be the end of the story.

We now recognise that *all* young people should not only finish their schooling but should continue their education beyond school. We know that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have greater difficulty in completing school and accessing further education than young people from more advantaged backgrounds.

Policy and equity

The OECD has identified three main policy areas affecting equity in education: *the design of education systems, practices in and out of school and how resources are allocated* - and ten steps to achieving equity.

While the design of education systems and the allocation of resources are largely outside the remit of schools and teachers, practices in and out of school are not. Schools *can* make a difference to the educational outcomes of their own students and *do* have some discretion in the allocation of resources. The Gonski funding was intended to help schools allocate resources specific to the needs of their students to overcome inequity. The funding was never intended to shore up advantage.

In the **design of education systems**, OECD members are asked to ensure three things:

- *Limit early tracking and streaming and postpone academic selection.*
- *Manage school choice to contain the risks to equity.* Unlimited school choice clearly is a major risk for Australian education.
- *In upper secondary education, provide attractive alternatives, remove dead ends and prevent dropout.*

In **resourcing**, members are asked to:

- *Provide strong education for all, giving priority to early childhood education and basic schooling.*
- *Direct resources to the students in greatest need.*

- *Set concrete targets for more equity, particularly related to low school attainment and dropouts, and*
- *Offer second chances.*

In **practices in and out of school**, the suggestions are to:

- *Identify and provide systematic help to those who fall behind and reduce repetition.*
- *Strengthen the links between school and home to help disadvantaged parents help their children to learn.*
- *Respond to diversity and provide for the successful inclusion of migrants and minorities in mainstream education.*

It is the responsibility of schools to examine their own practice in equity to remove the barriers to success for their students. It is the responsibility of systems to ensure that systemic barriers are removed, and resources allocated fairly, and the responsibility of governments to ensure that the social barriers are removed as far as possible and schools are adequately and fairly funded, with resources directed to the greatest need.

At the school level, I decided that I would remove as many of the barriers to success as possible for all my students, regardless of their background. This meant physical and material support: things as basic as provision of school uniform and shoes, funding of excursions, stationery, a breakfast program, access to technology, and health care.

It meant highly focused educational support for our students: EAL support in all Years, 7-12, literacy support, HSC tutorial support, a homework centre, provision of a full academic curriculum, with appropriate subject counselling and a wide range of subject options and pathways in senior high school, and the employment of additional professional and non-teaching staff to deliver these programs.

It meant engagement with university outreach and mentoring programs and with mentoring and enrichment programs provided by the business and arts communities. These programs are important in shifting the expectations and aspirations of disadvantaged students. As Bradley noted in her report on tertiary education in Australia, *Review of Australian Higher Education, Final Report*, December 2008, (p.40), three precursors are necessary to improve access to tertiary education for disadvantaged students:

- *Awareness of higher education*
- *Aspiration to participate, and*
- *Educational attainment to allow participation.*

We made sure all three precursors were in place at Holroyd. In the last three years that I was Principal, we averaged around 60% first round university offers for our HSC cohort.

Support also meant scholarships and financial support, both at school and afterwards in further education, and it meant advocacy on behalf of our students. Schools are in a unique position to advocate on behalf of the young people in their care. I see this as an extension of our role as teachers, not 'above and beyond'. It is part of our moral purpose in education, if you like, perhaps a little along the lines of Dietrich Boenhoeffer's idea of responsible action. When you know something is not right, you do what you can to make it right. Teachers do have agency.

In my last three years as Principal, I entered into negotiations with universities in NSW and the ACT with a view to their providing full scholarships for the small number of asylum seeker students who had met university entry requirements, initially for our students, and then for students from other schools. The Department of Education has since taken on the management of this program.

You might ask why this is important for what is, after all, a very small number of students? The answer is that *all* students are important, and that without intervention, few of these students would be able to undertake further education. The University Admissions Centre (UAC) makes no distinction between one international student and another, so the universities have no way of identifying asylum seeker students, unless they are provided that information.

Students on temporary visas are not eligible for the Education Access Scheme, no matter their enrolment in a disadvantaged school. When asylum seeker students gain entry to university, they are doing so competitively with mainstream advantaged students and without any concessions for disadvantage. What they need are scholarships to sustain them while they are studying and to cover their fees, though what is really needed is for the Federal Government to allow asylum seeker students access to HECS and HECS-Help, and while they are at it, to include permanent residents in HECS-Help eligibility.

In 2015, universities around Australia instituted scholarships and support programs specifically for refugees and asylum seekers. There has been no support from Government for the universities in this regard.

What is needed now, as well, is the provision of free, fully credentialled vocational training opportunities for refugees who do not seek a tertiary pathway, including mature age students needing Australian qualifications to enter the workforce, and adequate support for TAFE - as privatisation of the vocational education and training sector has not resulted in an equitable system.

For some groups in our society, unfortunately, social justice remains elusive, and while it does, engagement and participation in society, and the energy and motivation to achieve a better life, will simply not be there. Schools that service less advantaged communities provide the leg-up in life that more privileged students have from their family and school networks. To achieve success, schools serving disadvantaged communities need to be adequately funded. To achieve equity in education, funding must be directed where it is most needed, not at maintaining privilege.

We tend to take the right to an education a little for granted in Australia, but there are many countries where education is not a right, and where significant numbers of children go unschooled, especially girls. There are currently an estimated 260 million children who do not attend school: 70% are girls. Two thirds of the world's illiterates are female. Some of those girls, like Sokaina, came to Holroyd, and the education they received changed their lives for the better forever. That is the fulfilment of the promise of an equitable education.

In conclusion, I want to say what a privilege it has been for me as a teacher to work in disadvantaged schools. I have worked with people of extraordinary dedication and professionalism and met some extraordinary young people along the way.

One of those young people is Bashir, who was orphaned at twelve years of age and came alone to Australia by boat as an unaccompanied minor. Like many Afghan children, he had never been to school. In the Darwin detention centre, he was given an English dictionary and taught himself to read and write. The dictionary was his classroom, as there was no provision for the education of children in the detention centre. The lack of educational provision for children in detention is one of the areas where Australia has consistently been in breach of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* over the years. Detention of children itself is, of course, a breach of the *Convention*. How shameful that children as young as ten years of age can still be detained in Australia in the juvenile justice system.

On his release from detention, Bashir made his way to Sydney and enrolled in Holroyd High when he was fifteen. He successfully completed his HSC, and after completing an Accounting diploma at a private college, enrolled at ANU, first studying Commerce and then Politics and Economics. Bashir graduated in 2019 and is currently finishing a Master's degree in International Relations, with a view to becoming a diplomat: an *Australian* diplomat. He has been mentored in his university studies and his employment in the public service through Career Seekers, a philanthropic organisation that assists refugees and asylum

seekers into the professional workforce. Mentoring and workforce preparation are essential supports for disadvantaged young people negotiating unfamiliar study and workplace cultures. That mentoring needs to start early for disadvantaged children and continue through their education

Bashir is fortunate in that he arrived as a 'boat person' before the prohibition on asylum seekers' permanent settlement in Australia. He is now an Australian citizen. What has made the difference for Bashir in his life is that he has been the beneficiary of an education that is enabling him to reach his potential, despite the challenges life has thrown him. That is what equity is all about.

Disadvantaged young people do not deserve a second-rate education. They need the opportunity to derive the full benefit of their education, freeing them to participate effectively in Australian life. We are all the beneficiaries of an equitable education system and the losers from an inequitable one. There really is no choice.